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Thesis

THE MENTALITY OF POE VIEWED THROUGH HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Submitted by

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(A.B., CONNECTICUT COLLEGE, 1929)

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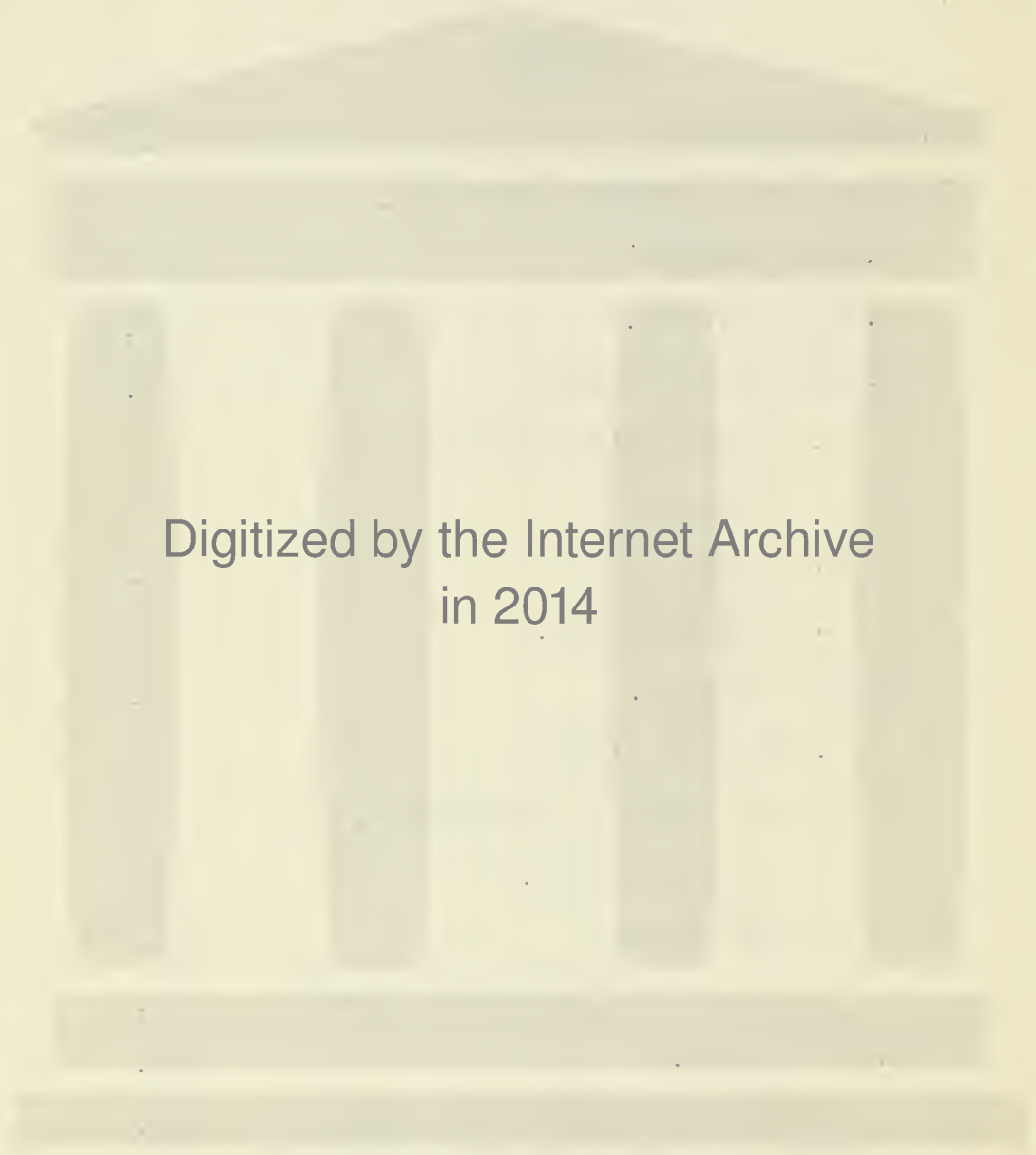
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THE MENTALITY OF POE
VIEWED THROUGH
HIS LIFE AND WORKS.

Edgar Allan Poe, although he has been dead nearly a century, remains today one of the most discussed and most misunderstood Americans who has ever lived. His works and his life are being continually dissected or built upon, separately or together, in order to yield new theories regarding him. Critics read his works; they ponder upon his life facts; and as a result, they advance additional ideas with more variety of opinion than they offer when a contemporary playwright or poet brings before them the very modern product of his brain. Poe has not been relegated to a transcendental realm with Emerson; he is not securely enthroned with Whitman; he is not even definitely dethroned with that butt of so much of his ire, Longfellow. This man who gloried in puzzles left behind him an enigma for critics, psychologists, and scholars to work upon, one for which they have yet to find a satisfactory solution.

Although Poe's life and his writings are often

regarded as quite foreign to each other, it seems absurd to separate them. An individual who wrote with Poe's intensity and lived with Poe's violence could never detach one phase from the other. The forces which evidently wrecked his life must, of necessity, be those which produced his works.

His Life

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January nineteenth, 1809. His father, David Poe, was the son of a merchant-soldier, and had been educated to be a lawyer. He forsook the practicing of law, however, in 1803, and joined a company of actors. In 1806 he married a member of the troupe, an English actress, Mrs. Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins. Edgar was their second son, born while the company was playing at the Federal Street Theatre in Boston, in the winter of 1809. The father evidently had little talent for the stage; his wife, beautiful, versatile, and strong-willed, supported the little family while it remained together.

After a few years of wandering about with the little theatrical troupe, journeying up and down, from Maine to Carolina, David Poe tired of the life. He deserted his wife, and is believed to

have died in Baltimore, probably bringing about his death more quickly through a taint of alcoholism hereditary in the family. Shortly after this, Mrs. Poe gave birth to a daughter and died in Richmond, Virginia, probably of consumption.

The three little children were left to be cared for by Richmond friends. The older boy, William, went to live with his grandfather, but was very wayward and was sent to sea to be reformed. He died while yet a young man. Rosalie, the baby, grew up a harmless imbecile. Edgar was taken into the family of John Allan, a Scotch tobacco merchant of Richmond, at the request of Mrs. Allan who was childless. As can readily be seen, the boy's inheritance was one of waywardness and artistic vagabondage. The environment of the Allan home was not one to curb these tendencies or to instill more stable characteristics in their place.

In the Allan household Poe fast became a spoiled child, beautiful and precocious. At the age of six he was taken to England by his foster parents and put to school in the Manor House School, Stoke-Newington. Here he remained five

years. Upon the return to America, Edgar Allan, as he was called then, entered a Richmond Academy. Here he excelled both in athletics and in classes, but was not allowed to hold his place of natural leadership. The aristocratic Richmond lads knew of Poe's parentage and his position in the Allan family, and refused him his rightful place. In this way his proud nature received an early wound. In this same period occurred his idolatrous and tempestuous affection for Mrs. Helen Stannard, the mother of a schoolmate. She is that Helen of his most perfect lyric. She died not long after Poe came to know her and it is recorded that the boy haunted her grave many nights thereafter.

In 1826, at seventeen, Edgar Allan was sent to the University of Virginia. During the single year of his attendance he attained distinctions in Latin, French, and Italian, became somewhat addicted to drinking, and piled up a goodly number of gambling debts. The atmosphere of the University was very bad for Poe. It was here that he took on the air and habits of the "I am a Virginian" gentleman. Yet all the time he was pretending to be a fine Southern gentleman, he knew

he was one only on sufferance. Allan had not adopted him, nor had he even promised to do so, should the boy make good. The uncertainty must have had a tremendously wearing effect on Poe. At least he learned to banish the mood temporarily in gambling, drinking, and fighting. In this attitude of recklessness he found some compensation for the inferiority he inwardly felt. At the end of a year Allan refused to meet his debts, took Poe from the University, and endeavored to put him to work at a desk in his own counting-house.

This confinement was too much for his artistic nature. After an obscure quarrel with Allan, Poe ran away. He eventually arrived in Boston where he enlisted in the Army, under the name of Edgar A. Perry, on May 26, 1827. At approximately the same time he published his first volume of poetry, "Tamerlane And Other Poems, By A Bostonian". He seems to have served faithfully in the army for two years. He was promoted for merit to be Sergeant-Major. In 1829 Mrs. Allan died and Poe went back to Richmond.

After Mrs. Allan's death a partial reconciliation was effected between the two men. Mr. Allan.

got Poe a substitute in the army and was able to get him into West Point. His work at the Academy was good at first, but after Allan married again Poe evidently felt he need expect no more help from that source and deliberately went about getting himself expelled from West Point.

The two years following Poe's court martial and dismissal from West Point have been held by most biographers to be obscure. Until recently it was generally accepted that he spent this period in Baltimore in a condition of extreme poverty, for it was in Baltimore that record is next found of him in 1833. However, within the last few months a manuscript by Alexandre Dumas has come to light in Italy. In it, Dumas speaks of meeting Poe in France. The manuscript has been pronounced genuine by Dumas experts. If Dumas really did meet Poe, if Poe really went to France, this year 1832 would be the logical one. Poe often told of strange adventures abroad, but no-one ever believed him. It would seem that the lost year of his life has at last been accounted for.

In whatever manner the intervening time may

have been spent, Poe emerged from his obscurity in 1833 to win a contest held by a Baltimore publication called "The Saturday Visitor". He submitted six "Tales Of The Folio Club" and one of them, "The MS. Found In A Bottle", won the short story prize. His poem "The Coliseum" would probably have won a poetry prize at the same time, had not the judges hated to give both awards to one contestant. This success gave Poe a practical start in journalism and literature. The rest of his life was spent in contributing to and editing magazines in Richmond, New York, and Philadelphia. This work began for him in 1835 when he became editor of the "Southern Literary Messenger", published at Richmond. The magazine leaped at once into fame. Poe became known to its readers as a haughty and severe critic as well as a writer of strange and terrible tales. His inability to drink temperately lost him this position, as it was to do repeatedly.

Virginia Clemm

Meantime, in 1836, Poe had married his child-cousin, Virginia Clemm, a strange young girl of thirteen. Her mother, Mrs. Clemm, had sheltered Poe in Baltimore and was devoted to him.

Poe married Virginia while she was not only a child in years but was obviously destined to remain a child in mind all her life. With this strange marriage we come to the first of the larger points on which the critics differ.

Virginia possessed a strange beauty, less beautiful than strange. Her undeveloped mind, her pale unhealthy face with its high forehead and large violet eyes may have comprised for Poe his ideal of unearthly purity and loveliness. He was devoted to her, and she to him - with the attachment of a child or an animal. It is interesting to note that Poe always called her "Sis", and that when he was away from home he never wrote to her directly, but addressed her through her mother.

Joseph Wood Krutch* advances an interesting theory concerning this marriage. He believes that Poe had a strong distaste for sexual passion and was, therefore, attracted to Virginia by the sexlessness of her beauty. Poe deliberately tied his

*Joseph Wood Krutch: "Edgar Allan Poe: A Study In Genius".

passionate nature to a child too young for sexual relation. Her prolonged illness made that relation impossible even when she had reached maturity. Mr. Krutch does not agree, however, with those who think that Poe's psychic abnormalities were due in part to this unnatural restraint. Rather, he finds in Poe's writings and in the stories of his unhappy love affairs a deep-lying inhibition which caused Poe to marry Virginia, thinking her youth would keep him from her, and their marriage keep him from other women. Certainly, Poe did not offer her the love of a husband for a wife, but found in her a means to sublimate some conflict. She became a necessary part of the unreality he lived in, and when she died he went nearly insane. She was his solace and his inspiration, and her mother gave him the third thing he needed, - care.

Before her death occurred, Virginia saw many of his literary triumphs. Probably his achievement was but a pretty toy to her but she loved it. His early volumes were marked by melancholy and pride and showed some imitation of Byron and Coleridge. These poems had appeared in the three much revised volumes: "Tamerlane And Other Poems",

in 1827; "Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, And Minor Poems", in 1829; and "Poems", in 1831. In the last volume appeared "To Helen", "Israfel", and "The City In The Sea". He wrote tales and criticism, also. In 1838 he published the "Narrative Of Arthur Gordon Pym", and in 1839, his "Tales Of The Grotesque And Arabesque".

His real fame came, however, in 1845 with "The Raven". For the first time Poe had won really audible applause both in America and abroad. A second-rate literary society accepted him and for a while he basked in its unwilling and amazed admiration. He was the man who could say of himself:* "I love fame - I dote on it - I idolize it - I would drink to the very dregs the glorious intoxication; I would have incense arise in my honor from every town and city on this earth; Fame! Glory! - they are life-giving breath, and living blood; no man lives unless he is famous; how bitterly I belied my nature and my aspirations when I said I did not desire fame and that I de-

*Joseph Wood Krutch: "Edgar Allan Poe: A Study In Genius".

spised it."

During this best period of his life he was* "a quiet, magnetic gentleman, faithful to his work, except for incapacitations caused by a morbid flight into drink". Yet despite this seeming peace, melancholy and moods were growing. Mrs. Clemm kept him physically alive with real devotion and affection. At home his worse self was subdued for he was the center of things. It was contact with the outside world that roused his unrest.

In 1847 Virginia Poe died and Poe was plunged into frantic grief. Her death released a kind of madness in him which he evinced through a series of hectic and tragic flirtations. All the women involved, - Mrs. Osgood, Mrs. Shew, Mrs. Whitman, Mrs. Shelton, - seemed part of the same wild dream, vainly pursued. He was to be married to Helen Whitman, a very eccentric widow who wrote extravagant poetry, always wore white, and used the scent of ether. His madness recognized some barrier and stopped this affair with Mrs. Whitman, the inspira-

*Clement Wood: "Poets Of America".

tion of the second "To Helen", only to become engaged to Mrs. Shelton. With Mrs. Shelton he had had a boyhood affair. It is useless to speculate how this alliance, which his death terminated, would have resulted.

Poe's Death

The final catastrophe which brought about his death was probably begun in Richmond. Exactly what occurred will never be known. He was found on October 3, 1849 in the back room of a saloon in Baltimore which had been used as a polling place. He was drugged or drunk. It has been suggested that he was drugged by an electioneering gang and made to serve as a repeater; also, that he had been drugged by robbers, for his money was gone. He was taken to a hospital, and died there four days later without having recovered consciousness. The attending physician testified that he was not under the influence of liquor, but something, probably drink, had precipitated a crisis of the chronic inflammation of the meninges from which he suffered, and it killed him.

On October ninth, two days after Poe's death, there appeared in the New York "Tribune" a strange obituary by Rufus Griswold whom Poe had evidently

regarded as a friend, for it was to him he had entrusted his posthumous fame. The strange article began*, "'Edgar Allan Poe is dead. He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday. This announcement will startle many, but few will be grieved by it. The poet was well known, personally or by reputation, in all this country; he had readers in England, and in several of the states of Continental Europe, but he had no friends'".

Rufus Griswold

After a brief and somewhat erroneous presentation of the facts of Poe's life, the Reverend Rufus Griswold proceeds with his impression of the man.

"'His conversation was at times almost supermortal in its eloquence. His voice was modulated with astounding skill, and his large variably expressive eyes looked repose or shot fiery tumult into theirs who listened, while his own face glowed or was changeless in pallor, as his imagination quickened his blood, or drew it back frozen to his heart. His imagery was from the worlds which no

*Joseph Wood Krutch: "Edgar Allan Poe: A Study In Genius".

mortal can see but with a vision of genius....

"'He was at times a dreamer - dwelling in ideal realms - in heaven or hell, peopled with creations and the accidents of his brain. He walked the streets in madness or melancholy, with lips moving in indistinct curses or with eyes upturned in passionate prayers, (never for himself, for he felt, or pretended to feel, that he was already damned,) but for their happiness who at that moment were objects of his idolatry; or with his glance introverted to a heart gnawed with anguish, and with a face shrouded in gloom, he would brave the wildest storms; and all night, with drenched garments and arms wildly beating the wind and rain, he would speak as if to spirits that at such times only could be evoked by him from that Aidenn close by whose portals his disturbed soul sought to forget the ills to which his constitution subjected him - close by that Aidenn where were those he loved - the Aidenn which he might never see but in fitful glimpses, as its gates opened to receive the less fiery and more happy natures whose listing to sin did not involve the doom of death. He seemed, except when some fitful pursuit sub-

jected his will and engrossed his faculties, always to bear the memory of some controlling sorrow....

"'Every genuine author in a greater or less degree leaves in his works, whatever their design, traces of his personal character; elements of his immortal being, in which the individual survives the person....

"'He had made up his mind upon the numberless complexities of the social world, and the whole system was with him an imposture. This conviction gave a direction to his shrewd and naturally unamiable character.... Passion, in him, comprehended many of the worst emotions which militate against human happiness. You could not contradict him, but you raised quick choler; you could not speak of wealth but his cheek paled with gnawing envy. The astonishing natural advantage of this poor boy - his beauty, his readiness, the daring spirit that breathed around him like a fiery atmosphere - had raised his constitutional self-confidence into an arrogance that turned his very claims to admiration into prejudice against him. Irascible, envious - bad enough, but not

the worst, for these salient angles were all varnished over with a cold repellent cynicism while his passions vented themselves in sneers. There seemed to him no moral susceptibility; and what was more remarkable in a proud nature, little or nothing of the true point of honor. He had, to a morbid excess, that desire to rise which is vulgarly called ambition, but no wish for the esteem or love of his species; only the hard wish to succeed - not shine, not serve, - succeed, that he might have the right to despise the world which galled his self-conceit.'"

This newspaper article by the Reverend Griswold is quoted at length because it is the opinion of a contemporary man and a fellow writer. The two were not on especially good terms; Griswold had reason to feel malicious toward Poe, for Poe had quarreled with and reviled him, as he did so many. Yet in this obituary the strangeness, the intangible thing that made Poe such an enigma even in his own day, is hinted at and vaguely captured by the terrorized impression Griswold gives.

Although it is true that Poe had no close

friends, several papers came at once to his defence and endeavored to refute the opinions of Griswold. These men went to the other side of the matter and described Poe as quiet, patient and gentlemanly, commanding respect, capable of true friendship. Both sides of the argument have their values and their faults.

It is true that Poe's nature had a dualistic trend. Acquaintances who saw the tender side of his nature could not believe he possessed the other until perhaps it was cruelly thrust upon them. It is true that pride, malice and envy led him to heinous behavior. It is also true that his character possessed and occasionally exhibited unbounded goodness. What conclusions, then, are to be drawn from these contradictions?

The Writings of Poe

In the work of his pen which Poe has left us we shall find some partial solution of the problem he presents. C. Alphonzo Smith* in the preface of his study of Poe's works says: "Poe has suffered a strange fate. Nobody ever doubted his genius, but his genius has clouded and ren-

*C. Alphonzo Smith: "Edgar Allan Poe".

dered spectral and remote his personality. He is popularly regarded as a manufacturer of cold creeps and a maker of shivers, a wizened, self-centered exotic, un-American and semi-insane, who between sprees or in them, wrote his autobiography in "The Raven" and a few haunting detective stories".

This may be the popular conception of his work, but an assiduous examination of it reveals much more. His writing falls into three general classes: poetry, short stories, and criticism. The least of these three groups is his poetry.

Poetry

Poe's theory of poetry* well defines his own practice. He stipulated that it should be "the rhythmical creation of beauty", having "for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth"; that it should not contain passion or humor, that sadness was the best "tone", and that the lyric was the only true form of poetry.

His early poems are obviously prentice work. Then only did he try long poems with "Al Aaraaf" and "Tamerlane". These first poems are hazy in

*Edgar Allan Poe: "The Poetic Principle".

structure, imitative in style, savoring of the English Romantic Poets, especially Byron, Shelley, and Coleridge. Nevertheless, the haunting beauty which he was later to master was already present. Poe lived all his life amid quite commonplace surroundings; therefore, this inspiration must have been produced within himself. His public thought he was playing with his weirdly beautiful thoughts, but it is far more probable that they were completely mastering him.

Poe's mature poetry can be classified in four groups according to subject matter. There are the poems on death, especially the death of a beautiful woman. Such are "Lenore", "The Raven", "Ulalume", "Annabel Lee". There are the poems dealing with a world of fantasy and strange spirits; among them "Israfel", "The City In The Sea", "The Haunted Palace". There are the personal poems, such as the two "To Helen" and "To My Mother". And then there are metrical exercises, such as "The Bells".

Here are no nature rhapsodies such as Bryant produced, none of the moralistic soaring which Emerson indulged in, no apt occasional verses like

Holmes', no recording of folk-lore such as Longfellow left. Only a mind possessed by the subjects of death and fantasy would have centered his poems upon them. It was form and mood that Poe sought to confine with words; he cared little for bare ideas. Although we may not fully understand his captured mood we get in the music of his suppressed experiences magnified echoes of our own soul's small troubles. It is impossible not to sense in some degree the banked fires of his heart, ever threatening flames. With refrains such as that of "The Raven" or "Annabel Lee" the mood of his verse is beaten into our minds, if not our souls.

One critic has caught the sensations produced by Poe's verse with a few prose lines of his own;* "We enter it to walk amid bizarre and terrific towers. We are shadowed by mysterious skies, we stand by dark waters. The poet shuts out the sun. It sifts only through thick leafage or stained glass or heavy arras. Perfume comes to us, but it emanates not from flowers, but

*Auslander and Hill: "The Winged Horse".

censers invisibly agitated; it is stealthy and overpowering. We see light, but of tapers and torches wind-shaken, whose writhing shadows are more important than their flame. Graves yawn, caskets disgorge. Feelings of nameless horror float in the air like mist."

The Haunted Palace

By "The Haunted Palace", which is like a poetic version of "The Fall Of The House Of Usher", Poe said that he meant "to imply a mind haunted by phantoms - a disordered brain".

"And travellers, now, within that valley,
Through the red-litten windows see
Vast forms, that move fantastically
To a discordant melody,
While, like a ghastly rapid river,
Through the pale door
A hideous throng rush out forever
And laugh - but smile no more".

According to many modern psychologists the imagination cannot completely abandon experience. Perhaps Poe meant to imply that his own fancy had difficulty in restraining a hideous throng from pouring forth.

Ulalume

"Ulalume" appears at first and casual reading a record of profound moodiness, presented in a jargon of despair. It is usually accepted as having some connection with the death of his wife, Virginia. Mr. Krutch*, however, sees in it a further symbolism, a description of hopeless hope. He interprets it to mean that Poe could not love in a normal fashion because some woman on whom his desire was fixed had died. He says, "If we knew who lay behind the doors of that tomb in the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir, we should know the answer to the greatest riddle of Poe's life".

To Helen

It is hardly fair in citing Poe's poetry to omit that perfect lyric of love in which for once he was certain and brave upon the heights, not caught in a depth of morbidity. Even his contemporary, Lowell, said of it, "The grace and symmetry of the outline are such as few poets ever attain. There is a smack of ambrosia about it." The perfect embodiment of his own poetic principle is found in the first "To Helen".

*J.W.Krutch: "Edgar Allan Poe: A Study In Genius".

"Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.

"On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the glory that was Greece,
And the grandeur that was Rome.

"Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
How statue-like I see thee stand,
The agate lamp within thy hand!
Ah, Psyche, from the regions which
Are Holy-Land!"

Writing thus, from the shadows of his soul, Poe produced so stringent, so poignant, a beauty that he has given us a glimpse of true perfection. The conclusion of his own "Poetic Principle" will serve as the epitome of what he thought the scope and field of poetry. To one who could compile such a catalogue of beauty must surely have be-

longed the faculty to feel it. As an antidote to the horror and morbidity of his tales we have this.

The Poetic Principle

"We shall reach, however, more immediately a distinct conception of what the true Poetry is, by mere reference to a few of the simple elements which induce in the Poet himself the true poetical effect. He recognizes the ambrosia which nourishes his soul, in the bright orbs that shine in Heaven - in the volutes of the flower - in the clustering of low shrubberies - in the waving of the grain-fields - in the slanting of tall, Eastern trees - in the blue distance of mountains - in the grouping of clouds - in the twinkling of half-hidden brooks - in the gleaming of silver rivers - in the repose of sequestered lakes - in the star-mirroring depths of lonely wells. He perceives it in the songs of birds - in the harp of Aeolus - in the sighing of the night wind - in the repining voice of the forest - in the surf that complains to the shore - in the fresh breath of the woods - in the scent of the violet - in the voluptuous perfume of the hyacinth - in the suggestive odor that comes to him, at eventide, from far-distant, undiscovered islands; over dim oceans, illimitable

and unexplored. He owns it in all noble thoughts - in all unworldly motives - in all holy impulses - in all chivalrous, generous, and self-sacrificing deeds. He feels it in the beauty of woman - in the grace of her step - in the lustre of her eye - in the melody of her voice - in her soft laughter - in her sigh - in the harmony of the rustling of her robes. He deeply feels it in her winning endearments - in her burning enthusiasms - in her gentle charities - in her meek and devotional endurances - but above all - ah, far above all - he kneels to it - he worships it in the faith, in the purity, in the strength, in the altogether divine majesty - of her love."

Tales And Short Stories

When one comes to examine the tales and the short stories of Poe one is impressed by the utter lack of human interest. Mr. Krutch* divides the tales into two classes: tales so fantastic and so utterly irrational as to be vivid nightmares, and tales called ratiocinative and depending upon pure logic, which might seem the product of a mind utterly devoid of imagination. A more

*J.W.Krutch: "Edgar Allan Poe: A Study In Genius".

specific classification is one such as Mr. Hastings* makes when he divides the tales into six groups as follows: tales of ratiocination, showing Poe's power of analysis and his vividness, as "The Murders In The Rue Morgue"; tales of pseudo-science, combining intellectuality with imagination and effects of horror, as "A Descent Into The Maelstrom"; tales of adventure and horror, like "The Cask Of Amontillado"; tales of conscience where the stress is not so much on the moral aspect of a sin as upon the sinner's horror of mind, as "The Black Cat"; romances of death, such as "The Masque Of The Red Death"; and sketches of natural beauty, (very few) as "The Island Of The Fay". In all the tales one is aware of the author's great imaginative and analytical powers. Each is perfectly constructed and surrounded with an atmosphere of gloom, solemnity, or horror. Poe makes no pretence whatsoever of dealing with reality; he means to be fantastic, visionary, unearthly.

The chief law of Poe's imagination must have been that there could be no exquisite beauty with-

*W.T.Hastings: "Syllabus Of American Literature".

out some strangeness in its proportions. This strangeness was not for him mere novelty, but abnormality. Even more than in his poems, this world lacks sunlight and pure air. It is a world isolated, - suspended by a strange chain of the imagination. The only things in nature as we know it which appealed to Poe were those which took on an air of nightmare strangeness under the influence of night-time and shadows.

His stories begin by appealing to the mind, and end by appealing to the soul. Despite the fact that in nearly every one is a calculated triumph of the mind, the effect produced is one of horror. So often is Poe lead by his own intellect to this creation of horror that one comes to feel that something truly fearsome exists within his own mind. When, in story after story, the theme is the power of the will to surmount obstacles one cannot but realize it is Poe's defence against his own weakness; that it is the ideal strength which he is setting before himself. And even in stories of the lowest physical tone, tales in which disease, [illegible]lidism, and epileptic seizure feature, Poe [illegible]ciously to his worship of

an ideal beauty.

Even the most casual reader of these works would call them morbid and neurotic. They represent a desperate flight from reality and an escape to a world which would yield a normal individual even less satisfaction than the real one. If they were to be catalogued, the incidents, characters, and thoughts of the stories would comprise an almost complete inventory of neurotic delights. His characters fear they know not what, and they are oppressed with a sense of guilt which is either frankly baseless, or the result of some deed too horrible to mention. Nameless terrors seize them by night; they spend long periods absolutely unconscious; they commit murders, not through any spirit of revenge, but merely because of a mastering obsession or an immovable fixation.

If one considers the heroes of the tales, one finds them strangely like their creator. Like Poe, each hero is a solitary spirit dedicated to some strange fate. The inevitable doom which awaits them may be considered a foreshadowing of Poe's own. These heroes have no social sympathies,

no human contacts with life. They choose in revelry or happiness the most lugubrious surroundings. In "Shadow" when the merry-makers gather to drink wine, it is around an ebony table where a corpse is their chairman. These weird beings usually have no names, no families, no histories. They are oppressed with strange melancholy; and to relieve it, they plunge into fantastic studies and speculations which only serve to take them farther away from their fellow-men. This quality in them is Poe mirroring himself, - whether or not with conscious intent would be hard to judge.

The women his imagination created are just as strange. They have names, but no family records, and the names are unearthly, - Morella, Ligeia, Ulalume. Usually they, too, are strangely versed in half-forbidden learning. They possess strange pale unearthly beauty and are subject to an unknown malady which is wasting them away. The beauty and purity of these women is, doubtless, the record of Poe's conception of Virginia.

With the years Poe escaped more and more into the strange unreality of his tales and poems.

Here he had created an imaginary life to parallel his real one. Out of some deep-lying need his story world originated. Gradually it happened that whenever he turned to his imagination for material he took it from the same piece. This became like the recurrent delusions which distinguish various forms of madness. He gained some variety in his stories, but the essence of them is the same. They are all weird with terror and gloom; in them strange mansions totter and collapse, ladies of vague beauty walk through unearthly romance, and men's souls are transfixed by grotesque emotions.

Yet, if it was mastery Poe wanted, here he possessed it. Here he could marshal the shadows and lights, sounds and stillnesses he gloried in. Here his phantoms were always on parade for him. Here he could pretend to the vast stores of knowledge which he never really possessed. And, in time, he even forced the practical outside world under the spell of his created world and gloried in its admission of his mastery.

And always, the external objective Poe sought was to produce a state of mind. Poe was

accused in his own time of savoring too strongly of German romanticism, but he replied to his critics that the terror he wrote was not of Germany, but of the soul. To produce this state he wrote such horror-smiting things as "The Masque Of The Red Death" which ends:-

"And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And darkness and decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all."

At the end of each tale Poe has effectively gripped his reader's fancy, if not his soul, and left it stranded, helpless, on a vague pinnacle; as at the conclusion of "Shadow",-

"But the shadow was vague and formless and indefinite, and was the shadow neither of man nor God - neither God of Greece, nor God of Chaldea, nor any Egyptian God. --- And at length I, Oinos, speaking some low words, demanded of the shadow

its dwelling and its appellation. And the shadow answered, 'I am SHADOW, and my dwelling is near to the catacombs of Ptolemais, and hard by those dim plains of Helusion which border upon the foul Charonian canal.' And then did we, the seven, start from our seats in horror, and stand trembling, and shuddering, and aghast: for the tones in the voice of the shadow were not the tones of any one being, but of a multitude of beings, and, varying in their cadences from syllable to syllable, fell duskily upon our ears in the well remembered and familiar accents of many thousand departed friends."

This is the keynote, these are the undertones of all his stories and tales. Even his descriptive passages are from the same pattern. To read him is to find ones mood suspended in a mist of incredulity. To have been himself and created these changing horrors must have been to possess a haunted mind and a distraught spirit.

Criticism

Larger in bulk than either poetry or short stories is the criticism Poe produced. In his own time his contemporaries knew him chiefly through this form of writing. For this field

Poe possessed excellent equipment. His keen and analytical intellect was quick to dissect a piece of literature. His own experience as a writer of both prose and verse gave him a basis of judgment such as Ben Jonson recommended when he wrote that "to judge of poets is only the faculty of poets". His point of view was almost purely artistic but his time was especially in need of such an attitude. He may have placed too great emphasis on his own especial foibles, such as technique, effect, originality, and freedom from didacticism. He possessed, nevertheless, great courage in his praising or condemning and was, on the whole, acute and just.

At an early date he set forth his poetic standard and adhered to it pretty steadily. As Mr. Foerster* has adequately expressed it: "Poe held clearly before himself a lofty vision of the critical activity and pursued its dictates with a devotion that shows his possession of a passion for criticism as well as for po-

*Norman Foerster: "American Criticism".

etry". Because he felt this passion so intensely Poe was likely to slash out recklessly with no regard for any interest but his own. In his warmth of feeling he was often impatient, disdainful, and even brutal. However, all this violence in reality sprang from his sincere, though too ardent, sense of criticism. His temperament caused him to expend enormous amounts of emotional and intellectual energy on what often seem to be exceedingly minor points.

This indiscreet ferocity was in no manner to make him literary friends. Books he reviewed no doubt often deserved the slashing they got, but he hit out blindly at them, as toward a personal enemy. James Russell Lowell once said that Poe "sometimes seems to mistake his phial of prussic acid for his ink stand".

His attacks on contemporary writers of New England, of whom Lowell was one, were especially bitter. Poe always professed an extravagant loyalty to the South. He regretted the chance that made Boston his birthplace and always avowed that he was a Virginian. He seemed to

be jealous that the literary center of his time was not in the Southern states, but was centered about Boston. He hated the vagueness of transcendentalism and insisted on identifying the movement with Boston.

When Lowell's "Fable For Critics" appeared Poe wrote: "Mr. Lowell is one of the most rabid of the Abolition fanatics; and no southerner who does not wish to be insulted, and at the same time revolted by a bigotry the most obstinately blind and deaf, should ever touch a volume by this author."

Of Poe, Lowell had written:*

"There comes Poe with his Raven, like Barnaby
Rudge -
Three-fifths of him genius, and two-fifths
sheer fudge;
Who talks like a book of iambs and penta-
meters,
In a way to make all men of common sense damn
metres;
Who has written some things far the best of

*James Russell Lowell: "A Fable For Critics".

their kind;
But somehow the heart seems squeezed out by
the mind, ..."

Poe does not so much take offence at this as at the fact that Lowell neglects the other southerners entirely. He writes:

"It is a fashion among Mr. Lowell's set to affect a belief that there is no such thing as Southern literature. Northerners - people who have really nothing to speak of as men of letters, - are cited by the dozen, ... Mr. Lowell cannot carry his frail honesty of opinion even so far south as New York. All whom he praises are Bostonians. Other writers are barbarians, and satirized accordingly - if mentioned at all."

In Poe's review of Hawthorne's "Twice-Told Tales", aside from the well-known setting apart of the short story as a distinct type in American literature, the most interesting part is Poe's single objection to the "Tales". He feels that "There is, perhaps, a somewhat too general or prevalent tone - a tone of melancholy and mysticism." It is curious to note

that that characteristic to which he objects is so decidedly his own, for if anywhere is to be found a melancholy and mystic tone it is in Poe's own stories, even more than in Hawthorne's. Perhaps it is this very kinship, sensed subconsciously, which made Poe insist that Hawthorne was "a man of the truest genius".

Emerson he dismissed curtly as a "mystic for mysticism's sake". William Cullen Bryant he praised highly. Whereas, Henry W. Longfellow felt the full and powerful force of his disapprobation. Poe himself was a plagiarist of the worst degree; his appropriations of others ideas can only be excused on the ground that for him truth and fiction were strangely mingled, and his imagination so strong a factor that he was not aware of what he did. Plagiarize he most certainly did; and yet, it was on that very score that he loosed all his malignant adjectives at Longfellow. He objected also to Longfellow's didacticism and to his lack of beautiful subjects. Mr. Krutch*

*J.W.Krutch: "Edgar Allan Poe".

thinks Poe's bitterness toward Longfellow was based on jealousy. Poe recognized in Longfellow his most successful rival, who was getting more praise than he deserved, whereas himself was not getting as much.

Longfellow's response to this attack was very penetrating. He sensed that Poe struck blindly from a suffering egotism, and said of him:

"The harshness of his criticisms I have never attributed to anything but the irritation of a sensitive nature chafed by some indefinite sense of wrong".

In all his writings Poe affected a profound and strange learning. He really knew little about science, but in his pseudo-scientific tales he pretended to know a great deal. To most of his heroes he gave this same strange knowledge he longed for himself. Perhaps it was the sense of power which supposedly accompanies learning that intrigued him. He evidently was content with the semblance, endeavoring to deceive both himself and others by it. It would be hard to say whether he had

a scholar's taste but not a scholar's training; or whether he was merely something of a charlatan in this respect.

Such vaguely startling things as mesmerism, character reading, and phrenology fascinated him. He loved to mystify and to be mystified. Puzzles of all sorts interested him and he was clever at their solutions. In this he could display great mental ingenuity and, without effect upon his passions or his human struggles, absorb himself in a cipher. He used many periodical columns in discussions of such puzzles. The story of "The Gold Bug" is but one manifestation of this interest.

In his criticism, then, Poe contributed not only to the volumes of American literary judgments, giving us thereby an interesting record of his contemporaries, but also he recorded something of himself. His critical ideas are, in large part, but a rationalized defence of his own tastes and desires. His criticism includes every other part of his life and work, and as a record of his motives, somewhat unifies them.

Works In Translation

Far more than any other American author Poe has been accepted by the world, translated into foreign tongues, and appreciated by foreign minds. One might think that France would have been the first nation to receive Poe, but that is not the case. It was Russia that took the initiative in establishing Poe's fame on the continent.

In the late 1830's Poe began to appear in translation in the leading Russian periodicals. His popularity there seems to have been assured from the first. If a Russian is led to converse of American literature the name he is most likely to mention is that of "mad Edgar". To the Russians he represents the height of American literary achievement. They know and admire him both as a story-teller and as a poet. Constantine Balmont, the Russian poet,* says this of him:

"Edgar Poe is the sweetest sound of the lute and the most passionate sob of the violin. He is sensation exalted to the state of crys-

*C.A.Smith: "Edgar Allan Poe".

tal serenity, an enchanted gorgeous hall ending with a magical mirror..... He lives among us, in our most delicate sensations, in the mad outcries of our sorrow, in the sonorous rhythms of our songs, in rhymes final and initial, in the beautiful gestures of the young girl who thinks of him."

Germany, too, early recognized Poe's genius. His stories appear in all the German popular collections of world literature, and his poems have almost an equal vogue. The German critics are inclined to think that Poe owed much to their own literature, and especially to Hoffmann. No direct indebtedness has ever been traced and it is thought to be true that Poe could not read German. Mr. Smith* cites an amusing anecdote to prove Poe's popularity in Germany.

While Mr. Smith was teaching at the University of Berlin a German girl who was interested in American history asked him whom he considered the most famous woman ever born

*C.A.Smith: "Edgar Allan Poe".

in America. After some hesitation he replied that he could not decide between Pocahontas and Dolly Madison, and asked what her choice would be. She, with no hesitation at all, replied, "Why, I should have said Annabel Lee".

In Italy Poe's popularity as an American genius is contested by Longfellow, Cooper, and Whitman. There he is better known through French translations than through Italian ones. However, before 1900 the majority of his works had been put into Italian. Previati, the Italian modernist painter, said that he found more inspiration in the writings of Poe than in the works of any other genius, ancient or modern.

A famous Japanese scholar was asked if he was familiar with the works of Edgar Allan Poe. "Familiar with them!" he replied, "We learn English in Japan from 'The Raven' and 'The Gold Bug'".

A Spanish edition of Poe's tales appeared in Madrid as early as 1858. Dr. Landa, who wrote its introduction, made an apt analogy when he said there is as much difference be-

tween Poe's tales and ordinary tales of witchcraft as there is between chemistry and alchemy. Ibanez, the novelist, alluded to Poe as his "spiritual and literary father". Even in the Central American and South American schools "The Raven" and "The Bells" are in the school textbooks.

And in France it is thought that no closer or more interesting literary affinity ever existed than that between Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire adopted all Poe's critical commands and defended them with unswerving loyalty. He translated Poe's stories into French with an amazing exactitude. In times of stress he even prayed to Poe. Mallarmé and Mourey did for Poe's verse in France what Baudelaire did for his prose. In 1919 Fontainas wrote: "No writer of the English language has penetrated so profoundly the consciousness of the writers of all lands as has Edgar Allan Poe. In France he is as truly alive today as the most living of French poets."

England, too, defended him from an early

period. Swinburne was one who admired him immensely. He wrote: "Once as yet, and once only, has there sounded out of it all (American literature) one pure note of original song - worth singing, and echoed from the singing of no other man; a note of song neither wide nor deep, but utterly true, rich, clear, and native to the singer; the short, exquisite music, subtle and simple and somber and sweet, of Edgar Poe."

Poe, who admired Tennyson tremendously, would have been very gratified to know that when the English poet was asked in 1875 to write an epitaph of one line for Poe's monument in Baltimore he said, "How can so strange and so fine a genius, and so sad a life, be expresst and compresst in one line?" And to the committee who made the request he wrote his admiration of Poe's work, and some years later said: "I know several striking poems by American poets, but I think that Edgar Poe is (taking his poetry and prose together) the most original American genius."

When American critics pass curt comments

of dismissal where Poe is concerned it is well to think of these continental views. It seems characteristic that they are able to consider the man's genius at its true value, unhampered by theories regarding his habits of living. We Americans are too little familiar with genius to know how to treat it when we have it in our midst. Genius is not a matter to be judged by the prevalent questionnaire method. We, with our insistence on taking all factors into consideration, have not yet arrived at so consistent and considerate an evaluation of Poe as Europe had formulated while the man was still alive.

Theories And Conclusions

It is only through a whole view of the life and achievement of Edgar Poe that any solution of his complexities can be arrived at. Nevertheless, it is first necessary to subject his motives to the microscope of analytic theory in order to see what made the wheels of his being revolve.

His Critics

Poe has suffered a great deal at the hands of his critics. He did so when he was alive. Instead of the admiration he craved, they gave

him counsel he would not heed. As a result of his treatment of them they thoroughly defamed him both during his lifetime and immediately afterwards. They called him everything from fiend to prig. They alluded to his writing as but little better than trash; and they hailed him as the greatest writer that ever existed. Both as a man and as an artist Poe was one of those who touch the deeply hidden chords in others' natures and awaken enthusiasms or antipathies which those who feel them cannot account for.

His life has been the subject of the sort of research awarded only to strange and suggestive careers, yet he was a man much as other men. The difference is that his weaknesses were weaker, and his strength stronger. His photographs show that he had a marked ideal face similar to that of Byron or Heine. As a young man he must have been considered handsome, but as he grew older he showed all too plainly the signs of the vexed spirit within.

Influences Of His Life

As a boy he was moody and sullen, given to quick and irrational bursts of anger. It

was a case where the child was father to the man to an almost perfect degree. Nor can he be held altogether accountable for the mismanagement of his life when one considers his own parents and then the contrasting life with the Allans. Both at school in Richmond and later at the University he was never allowed to forget the presence of a social barrier between himself and the well-bred Southern boys. It was through this treatment that there became fixed in his nature that obsession of morbid and sensitive pride which he so often attributed later to the heroes of his stories. Mr. Foerster considers his disaster inevitable.*

"His very entry into the world was ominous: with a temperament and nervous organization portending disaster, he found himself almost from the start without parental sympathy and guidance, in a land averse from if not positively hostile to the aesthetic vision of life; and not far ahead lay poverty, confu-

*Norman Foerster: "American Criticism".

sion, frustrated ambition, repeated nervous collapse, and a few hours of happiness to heighten the contrast."

Edgar Allan Poe presents the sad case of an intellectual man who had no close friends to whom he could turn; a man who used his strength in a daily struggle against poverty and burned out his heart in vain pride; an man who had no cheerful home as his refuge. Many would have been his friends, but his very short and violent temper lost them for him. When his pride was injured he struck out blindly in his pain, as tortured people are likely to do, without stopping to realize that those whom he reviled or wounded were either not responsible for his sufferings or else ignorant of how they had wounded him. At times his irascible individualism seemed to take him out of his way to pick a quarrel. Many literary men, who could have aided him, would gladly have received him, had the lash of his tongue and pen not cut so deeply.

Mr. Parrington* believes that if any particular environment was responsible for his highly individual and creative nature it was that of the planter gentry of the south, indolent, taking a pugnacious pride in locality, strongly disliking alien ways, colored with haughtiness, dissipation, wastefulness, and chivalry. He always wished to be considered a Southern gentleman. The outward circumstances of his situation mattered a great deal to him as a young man; less, as he grew older. He thought that to be accepted as a gentleman was every bit as important as to be acknowledged as a genius.

His early years were full of failures. He failed with the Allans; he failed in school and college; he failed at West Point; he failed or suffered in his gropings after love. Until he found the outlet of poetry his whole life must have seemed futile to him, and entirely unsuccessful. In consequence, he

*V.L.Parrington: "The Romantic Revolution In America."

sought consolation and confidence in a dream world. When he found reality was yielding him so little value he abandoned it for unreality which he proceeded to test with intensity and zest. He became the man who loved mystery and hoaxes, for the sense of secret superiority which they gave him, and because they blended into the growing masquerade with which he concealed and deceived himself. Always he played a role, that of a man cut off from the majority of men by a great learning, strange passions, and a dark destiny; a man always superior to those with whom he had no part.

The people in his books became projections of himself. His studies of character were not made from observation, but from direct acquaintance with himself. This intense subjectivity made his invention of comparatively little score. He had no real experience of life or of anything, except himself. The lives of his characters touch the life of the world at large at no single point. Everything they do or think revolves solely around

themselves. They maintain no social, moral, or economic contacts whatsoever. His gift was certainly in expression, but even so it was limited entirely to his own emotions and to the deductions which his elaborately rationalizing mind could make from them. Therefore, we find his imaginative writings carry a sense of authority in direct proportion to the intimacy of their connection with his own states of mind.

His genius was recognized early. The question to be discuted was whether or not to accept a genius so mixed with neurotic sensationalism and perversity of spirit. His range of vision was far too wide for his contemporaries to receive. His fancy ranged not merely from the earthly to the supernal, but from the infernal to the Arcadian. Mrs. Robert Browning said of him that he possessed the ability to make horrible improbabilities seem near and familiar. He addressed in his readers "their occasional feelings of mystery, of dark powers at work in the universe, of inexplicable, of ugly and harrowing things

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from which men customarily avert their eyes, of the strange functioning of the senses, the nerves, the subconscious self."*

Yet in this expression of life in general as he viewed it, and of his own life in particular, though he expressed it by a deliberate creation of the hideous, the perverted, the ruined, he did it with such masterly technique as to produce an impressive beauty from it all. The grotesque touches in his stories and poems are handled as only a genius could handle them. They are beautiful and effective in the same way as are gargoyles seen in the moonlight on the façade of an old cathedral. Only those who have a little of his own neurotic strain can feel his power, the immensity of the effect of such a genius.

There is no humor in his work for he had none in his life. For the same reason there is little morality. His art was his only philosophy. And the complete theory which he

*Norman Foerster: "American Criticism".

incorporated there is vague and disjointed because Poe was so astonishingly deficient himself in ethical development. His life seemed to yield nothing but despair to his introspective vision. That outlook could scarcely be expected to produce high ideals and noble aspirations. With him reason is a supreme end, but having no moral support it makes no marked progress.

Poe first reasoned in order to escape feeling. He then seized upon the idea of reason for the explanation of the mystery of his own character. The rest of his life he spent proving this to himself, as if it were a perpetual mathematical proposition. Mr. Krutch* imagines his gift of exposition was cultivated by practice upon himself. "If he was to maintain his sanity his fantisies must seem to him reasonable and accountable; he explains and justifies them to himself; and in so doing he learns how they may be made to seem most reasonable to others."

*J.W.Krutch: "Edgar Allan Poe".

If one should assume that most creative work is the result of unfulfilled desires, springing from either idiosyncratic or universal maladjustments to life, one could accept Poe as an exaggerated example of just such an artist. At any rate, Poe succeeded in fashioning a legend about himself which is so closely interwoven with threads of his daily life and of his imagination that it is impossible to unravel one from the other. His life and his work were a continual vibration between the realistic and the mystic.

Dypsomania

Parallel to his mental veering from morbid grotesqueness to lucid rationality and back again were his oscillations between abstinence and dissipation. However, his drinking, about which so many wild theories have been hazarded, was not of a social nature, but was an obsession even to a stage of insanity. He was a true dypsomaniac in the medical sense. Insobriety was with him purely spasmodic and between the periods when this species of insanity

seized him he not only refused alcoholic drink of all kinds but genuinely believed, with the pathetic earnestness of those so affected, that he would never touch it again. Suddenly however, as the result of some obscure psychic cause, an urge would seize him; he would take one glass and be lost. Such sporadic and apparently inexplicable spells of drunkenness as he indulged in can only be accounted for by disease.

Poe told Helen Whitman regarding his dissipation: "It has not been in pursuit of pleasure that I have periled life and reputation and reason. It has been in the desperate attempt to escape from torturing memories, from a sense of insupportable loneliness, and a dread of some strange impending doom."

Influence of Women

The interpretation of this man has been sought, even more than in his addiction to drink, in his attitude toward various women who figured in his life. His feeling for his wife, Virginia Clemm, has already been

somewhat discussed, but other theories, regarding other women have been advanced.

It is thought by Mr. Page* that two strong motives governed Poe's life, in so far as it could be governed. These were his devotion to Virginia and to her mother, whom he calls his "more than mother" in the sonnet which tells of his feeling for her; and his passionate desire for literary fame.

One of the more common ideas is that Poe was possessed of a mother fixation. It has been averred that his literary work is the result of love repressions starting from the death of his mother in his infancy, followed by the loss of his foster-mother, Mrs. Allan, and by his love disappointments.

It is certain that from an early age Poe nursed a wrong that in some vague way connected itself with his mother. All his life he carried with him her portrait locket. All his life, too, he passionately defended his mother's profession as an actress.

*C.H.Page: "The Chief American Poets".

It is said that Mr. Allen first refused to adopt the boy because of what his mother had been. From this arose in the boy's mind a sense of frustration and wrong, both against his mother and himself. He must have been a lonely boy. Perhaps that sense of loneliness drove him fiercely back to the memory of his mother, although it would not have been likely that he could actually remember her.

Mr. Clement Wood* makes this analysis of the situation: "Evidence points to a mother fixation or complex, an over-attachment to his mother, and to later substitutes for her, in four or more women older than himself; and also to a lesser, cloudier erotic affection for his sister who went mad, and was succeeded by a succession of cousins and other young women who took her place in his fancy. One of them, Mary Deveraux, apparently embodied his strongest emotion; and she too was denied him. In both these fixations the near relationship produced the inhibition preventing

*Clement Wood: "Poets Of America".

successful suit, and an imperative to search continually until he found in some love object the mother, or the sister. This is one of man's impossible searches: and when superimposed upon a descent from wayward, artistically vagabonding forbears, and an inherited alcoholism, the chance for successful integration of life is slim indeed. In every case he either threw up a defense mechanism which broke off the incipient affair, or carried it through, as in his marriage to Virginia, and found in it no satisfaction of his deepest need. Either way was torture: and out of this twisting soul, in its extended agony, came the deathless music."

It is noticeable in both his poetry and his prose what a fascination the contemplation of dead women had for him. He said that he considered the death of a beautiful woman the most melancholy thing in the world. He dwelt with troubled emphasis, often, upon the sin of disloyalty to a dead wife, as in "Eleanora" or "Ligeia". He never forgot the first Helen of his boyhood, Mrs. Stannard.

Her name - Helen - was always the magical one, capable of swaying his imagination to extremes. The lovely elegy, "To One In Paradise", was written for Mary Devereaux. Her figure never left his memory, either, and many of his dead ladies are conscious or unconscious emanations from that idea, - Lenore, Annabel Lee, Ligeia. He even saw in sickness, due to his mother and Virginia Clemm, an element of high beauty. He has given us Berenice, Madeline, Morella, all suffering from and made beautiful by a mysterious disease.

Such women as these do dominate his verse and his stories. Women played a tremendous part through all his life, from his invalid mother, his sister Rosalie, Mrs. Allan, Mary Devereaux, Mrs. Stannard, Virginia, Mrs. Clemm, to the strangely violent affairs with Mrs. Whitman and Mrs. Shelton just before he died. Where, however, his writing or his living took root each from the other in this respect, no one will ever be able actually to tell.

Conclusion

In the forces of his entire life, internally and externally working upon him; in the production of his writings, so much a part of himself; in his habit of drink; and in his curious attitude toward women have been gathered up the threads of the pattern that is Poe. It is the legend of himself as a whole, rather than any single unit of it, that is his supreme artistic creation.

Possessed of a neural instability amounting almost to a dissociated or split personality, haunted by a continual fear of insanity, life was to Poe as much of a nightmare as one of his own tales. Yet in this weird dream of himself he was not so much an actor as he was acted upon, by impulse, sensitiveness, pride, and morbid melancholy. He beat the wings of his distraught spirit against the unbending bars of life in vain, always aware that it was useless. He wrote Helen Whitman less than a year before his death:

"I am calm and tranquil and but for a strange shadow of coming evil which haunts me I should be happy. That I am not supremely

happy, even when I feel your dear love in my heart, terrifies me. What can this mean?"

Poe always knew that the shadow was there. He delayed its realization with escape into his writing, with passionate love affairs, with spasmodic drunkenness, but always that inevitable Fate threatened him.

Of his life Poe himself wrote: "My life has been whim - impulse - passion - a longing for solitude - a scorn of all things present in an earnest desire for the future." His wish has seen fulfillment, inasmuch as the present has made him a problem of speculation and genuine interest; reads his stories and poems with real appreciation and admiration; and at last accepts him as a great American, a gentleman and a genius.

SUMMARY

Edgar Allan Poe has been and still is a much misunderstood figure in American annals. The only way in which to arrive at some slight conclusions about him is through a consideration of all the factors of his lifetime.

Poe was born in Boston in 1809 of theatrical, wandering parents. While Edgar was still a baby his father deserted Mrs. Poe, and a few years later she died of consumption. Poe and his brother and sister were taken care of by friends in Richmond where his mother's death had occurred. Edgar Allan, as he then became, was taken into the family of John Allan, a tobacco merchant in Richmond. The name was not made legal, however, - one of the things which always rankled with Poe, as did Mr. Allan's scorn of his mother's profession as an actress.

In the Allan household Poe fast became a spoiled child. His early education took place in Richmond, and at a school in England. In 1826, he was sent to the University of Virginia where he remained but one year, due

to the wild life he led there. He was a good student, but he sought to drown the increasing perplexities of life in drinking and gambling, and Mr. Allan refused to settle his debts, and withdrew him.

Unable to stand the tedious existence Mr. Allan set for him in Richmond, Poe ran away and joined the army. At about the same time he brought out his first poems. After a couple years in the Army Mr. Allan made it possible for Poe to transfer to West Point, where he remained but a year.

After several struggling years he was able to make a start in the writing game, by winning a short story contest. This served to establish the general trend of the remainder of his life. During the following years he was editor, critic, author, and poet, in connection with numerous magazines.

Meantime, in 1836, Poe married his child-cousin, Virginia Clemm. On this strange marriage many theories and explanations have been based. Poe was very dependent upon her and upon her mother, who looked after them

both.

His literary fame reached its crest with "The Raven". After that a wave of admiration carried him high for a little time. However, with the death of Virginia in 1847, Poe was plunged into frantic grief from which he sought relief in a series of frenzied love affairs. He broke his engagement to one woman, only to become engaged to another. The second was culminated by his sudden death in 1849.

How he finally came to die will never be known. He was found in the back room of a saloon in Baltimore, either drugged or drunk. He died without ever recovering consciousness. His obituary by Rufus Griswold shows the strange conception of the man which prevailed even in his own time. His actions were of such dualistic nature that he could never hold his friends for long, and made many enemies.

In his writings there appear further materials to add to the complete view of Poe. His work falls into three groups: poetry,

short stories and tales, and criticism. The least in bulk of these three groups is the poetry.

Poe's poetry follows very closely his own Poetic Principle. His early poems are a promise which his later ones fulfill. His subject matter consisted mainly of death and fantasy, with a few personal poems and metrical exercises. And always these poems were meant to induce a mood, even as they recorded one. He showed himself an aesthete, a craftsman, a rebel in the cause of beauty.

Upon examination of the tales one wonders where the beauty of his verse has been left, for they are so largely bound in horror and morbidity. Each shows the author's great imaginative and analytical powers. And within their words is caught nearly every phase of abnormal thinking and acting. The heroes of the tales are curiously like Poe himself, solitary spirits dedicated to strange fates. The heroines are equally weird and unearthly. In his tales and stories Poe found a means of temporary escape from himself.

Some deep-lying need of his nature was satisfied through their creation. And as always he sought, and gained, as his chief end - effect.

The third group of his writings is the largest one - criticism. He was probably most widely known as a critic during his lifetime. The same intense spirit he manifested in everything else here made him strike blindly and savagely at all who opposed or rivaled him. Against the contemporary New England writers he was especially bitter. He never failed to be attracted by the unusual, and always pretended to possess a vast learning which in reality he did not have.

Even before Poe died his works had been translated into many languages. In fact the Continent was far quicker to recognize his genius than was his own country. He is used as a text in many countries today, and nearly every European tongue contains translations which are deeply admired by their readers.

At the hands of critics Poe has suffered much, from his own lifetime up to the present

time. Out of the influences of his life many theories have been formulated and proved in part. In his heroes they have found himself. In his dypsomania they have found too much to blame. Every woman with whom he had the slightest intimate contact has been burdened with the accusation that she caused his strange behavior. His unusual genius has been analyzed from every angle and subjected to the most minute scrutiny.

And out of it all, Edgar Allan Poe still remains the most puzzled-over, the least understood, the best subject for speculation in all our American literature. The only solution seems to be to take the views and sift them carefully through a reading of his work. The chief mistake arises in the attempt to separate the man from his writing. It can not be done, for they are one.

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